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# **Using service design to understand digital preferences for improving applications for tertiary education in under-represented markets**

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# **Using service design to co-create a digital strategy to improve tertiary education participation amongst under-represented markets**

## **Abstract**

Participation in tertiary education is an important factor in achieving social parity and access to opportunity for Australians. The current government agenda is to increase participation amongst low socio-economic, culturally and linguistic diverse, Indigenous and remote peoples to be representative of their proportion in the population. This paper draws on the field of service design to bring an innovative approach to developing social marketing strategy. This research reports the findings of two qualitative studies involving 211 participants across Australia to elicit a psychologically based approach to segmentation and generate innovative digital solutions that will increase applications to participate in tertiary education. This work is the result of a multi-disciplinary team that brought together practitioners from the widening participation and equity fields along with social marketers and service marketers.

## **Introduction/Background**

Equity in education is based on the goal of creating an environment in which students with experience of disadvantage can achieve parity of representation in student enrolments as in the broader Australian population. For low socio-economic background students, therefore, equity of representation would be achieved at 25% of the student population. Currently, the national undergraduate enrolment share for low socio-economic status (low SES) students is under-represented at 16.5% with enrolments now totalling 229,056 having grown from 14.4% or 153,357 enrolments in 2008 for this group (Department of Education 2015). This increase also illustrates how participation in university study has widened beyond the social and cultural groups that traditionally access tertiary education and is the result of a national policy agenda called Widening Participation (WP). The typical cohorts of interest to this agenda are low-income earners, people with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) (Martin, 1994). Within these cohorts of interest, four target markets have been identified as needing attention; to primary markets (high school students and recent school leavers) and two influencer markets (parents and high school staff) (Bennett et. al., 2015). A key stage in the customer journey for tertiary education participation, where interventions are crucial, is the application stage (Bennett et. al., 2015). A lack of evidence as to the effectiveness of widening participation interventions (see Naylor et. al. 2013) led to a review of 76 of the numerous interventions to date. Bennett et. al. (2015) identified that well-designed technologies and online resources were effective and encouraged stakeholder-centred, research-informed and iterative interventions. Another shortcoming of interventions to date include favouring of demographic segmentation which appears related to Australian Government policy being focused on demographic shifts (e.g. Bradley et. al., 2008).

A national approach is desired by the Australian federal government and one method to achieve this in a cost-effective way that can be upscaled, addresses barriers of physical location across the vast distance in Australia while allowing tailored personalised information that is consumer-specific is digital. However there are many misconceptions about the digital literacy and digital divide of the under-represented markets that are the focus of widening participation efforts and this research seeks to address these misconceptions and pose that a digital approach would indeed an effective national approach. To this end, we use a service design approach that is co-creative and engaging to elicit a psychologically based approach to segmentation that generates innovative digital solutions that will increase applications to participate in tertiary education.

## Psychological segments

The extensive WP research typically focuses upon grouping individuals on the basis of their demographic characteristics. This demographic-focused approach has produced a large body of work with insight that has advanced the practices of equity practitioners to date. In marketing theory and practice, we know that new levels of insight can be gained by grouping individuals by multiple shared characteristics, such as psychographic and behavioural qualities. It is in the interplay between these characteristics of a target group, that a different and deeper understanding can be garnered. In social marketing, effective behaviour change rests upon identifying and selecting characteristics that are meaningful predictors of behaviour (Lee & Kotler, 2016). It is from this basis that new insights emerge and new strategies can be developed. The target markets are the basis from which the personas are derived. A persona is a research-based profile which represents variations within a target group with distinct motivations and behaviours (Marshall et al, 2015; Nielsen, 2011; Sankupellay et al, 2015). Importantly, personas often transcend demographic characteristics, describing and categorising common attitudes, experiences and perspectives. As such, individuals of various demographics may share an attitude, be in a similar stage of the change process, or be seeking similar support. It is this attitude/stage/need that is the more meaningful common predictor of behaviour and, if leveraged well, will bring about the desired change in behaviour. By focusing on these common denominators, thus moving beyond the demographic-focused lens, a strategy can be more widely applied in a manner that ameliorates location and time hurdles that have impeded prior WP efforts. Thus we pose the following research question: *RQ1. What are the personas in under-represented market segments for tertiary education participation?*

## Digital preferences of under-represented markets

Past research in the UK (Helsper, 2008), US (Choi & DiNitto, 2013) and Australia (Newman et al, 2010) suggests that those with deep social disadvantages are also likely to be disengaged from the Internet. Findings suggest that the socially disadvantaged tend to have very low rates of Internet use compared to the socially advantaged, owing to lack of exposure to digital technology, low income or medical conditions, and quality of access and attitudes towards ICTs (Choi & DiNitto 2013). Nonetheless, Choi and DiNitto (2013) also discovered “the unexpectedly engaged” who used technology despite their social disadvantage. Characteristics were youthfulness, being single, or having children and a higher level of education. This particular result demonstrates that certain individuals within socially disadvantaged groups can overcome barriers to digital engagement. These assumptions about reduced levels of digital literacy amongst low income and disadvantaged cohorts are contradicted by the uptake and current use of digital technologies such as smartphone ownership and devices. In Australia nine out of 10 people own a smartphone (Lancaster 2016) and research on low-income earners found internet access, device and smartphone ownership to be high (Russell-Bennett, Mulcahy, Foth, Little, & Swinton 2014). A digital approach to providing information and services about participating in tertiary education would be broadly accepted by the cohorts that comprise LSES and disadvantaged communities. Supporting evidence is found in the level of access to online learning among regional, remote and outer-urban students and is a viable solution for students with a disability, those not wanting or able to relocate, mature-aged students and Indigenous peoples, due to its holistic approach (Watson, 2013). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) reports that in 2014-2015, 97% of households with children aged under 15 years had internet access, and 82% of households without children under 15 years of age. Households in major cities were more likely to have internet access at home (88%); yet some 79% of households in remote and very remote parts of Australia also had internet access. Hence, this data provides further evidence that a digital approach to providing information to low SES and disadvantaged communities is suitable, advantageous and viable. We therefore raise the following research

question: *RQ2. What are the digital preferences of personas for engaging with tertiary education participation?*

### **Method**

This research involved service design, which is an interdisciplinary process to solve a problem, a new way of thinking and a set of evolving tools and techniques that can be applied to industries such as retail, banking, transportation, healthcare and education. Service design is human-centred, co-creative, iterative, evidenced and holistic with an ability to provide solutions and experiences (Patricio & Fisk 2010). Importantly service design can be harnessed for social impact. In this project, a service design approach was used to generate imaginative, innovative and interesting social marketing strategies to increase participation amongst groups with low tertiary education participation. The research used two qualitative studies in the service design process: the first study involved interviews to identify personas reflecting key psychological motivators and barriers for participating in tertiary education with the second study involving participatory workshops to co-create solutions for a national social marketing strategy. Interviews seek to deepen information and understanding, allowing researchers to make sense of the multiple meanings and interpretations of a specific action, occasion, location or cultural practice (Johnson, 2002). The method permits the researcher to delve into the 'hidden perceptions' of their research participants and overcome cognitive bias (Marvasti, 2004).

Following Human Research Ethics Approval, participants were recruited from the four target markets to provide primary research to develop personas and identify digital preferences for a national approach to tertiary education. The data were collected in three phases to provide a total sample size of 211 participants: 39 participants for the interviews, 121 participants in participatory workshops and 51 participants in validation interviews to confirm the proposed persona-specific solutions. Participants were recruited from urban, outer urban, inner regional, regional and remote locations across Australia. The sample characteristics showed an even distribution amongst males (47%) and females (53%) with key cohorts well represented e.g. Australian and Torres Strait Islanders 20.3% and CALD 15.2%.


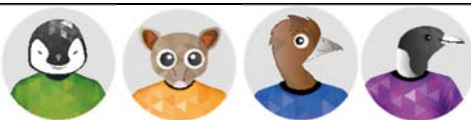

### **Results**

#### **Interviews**

The participant voice is critical to a deeper understanding of the motivations, barriers and benefits of tertiary education within low SES cohort groups. Personas are the qualitative expression of participant voices distilled to the key characteristics, motivations, barriers and behaviours. Hence this research focused on the use of service design tools to develop cohort personas that can then be mapped to goals, behavioural determinants and the final social marketing strategy. The foundation for developing the personas was drawn from the intervention modelling recommendations of Michie et al. (2008), and the interviews to group individual decision-making styles according to their shared attitudes, knowledge, personal values, perceptions and dreams (see image below). This took a step further than the demographic groups of the low SES cohorts, which was the focus of a survey of expert proxies on barriers and motivators for widening participation (Raciti, Eagle & Hay 2016). In all four learner personas (high school and recent school leavers), four parent personas and three school staff personas were identified, as outlined in the next three pages. The interviews and workshops revealed many shared needs and these have been used to underpin the strategy. The personas that emerged were represented by visuals that are gender, ethnicity and age neutral (See Figure 1). Australian animal images were selected as the visual device to avoid biases such as gender, age and ethnicity, yet still resonate with the participants. The animals were anthropomorphised to have sufficient human qualities that generated

emotional transfer, while still retaining the animal characteristics. The personas for high school students and recent school leavers were found to be the same.

**Figure 1 Personas for under-represented markets**

Figure 1: Personas for under-represented markets						
High school students/Recent school leavers						
						
Parents				School staff		
						

Based on the interview data, the profile of each of the personas has been visualised in two ways: 1) a continuum of psychological characteristics and 2) key support mechanisms that create the person-specific value propositions (see Appendix A for an example of a persona profile). The key psychological characteristics relevant to preparing and applying for tertiary education were career goal (making money or life journey); stage of decision process; preference for doing things by themselves or with others; space and urgency of getting started with a career; and confidence about future study. The high school students' temporal perception is aspirational as study options are in the future. The recent school leavers, unlike the high school learners, had the temporal perspective of the present, thus creating a sense of urgency for action. The profile of each persona is based on the theoretical frameworks of stage of change (Prochaska 2008) and social support theory (Loane, Webster and D'Allesandro 2014). The profile also includes a summary of the key motivators and barriers for participating in tertiary education as well as key messages to be used when communicating the value proposition to each persona.

## Participatory workshops

The data from the participatory workshops was in the form of visualised posters (See Error! Reference source not found.). Content was analysed using an emergent strategy which allows the nature of the analysis to follow the structure of the data itself (Mostakas, 1994). All personas in each target market demonstrated a preference for digital solution that provided access to both face-to-face and digital solutions however, specific themes arose at the target market level (see

**Figure 2 Visualised poster example**

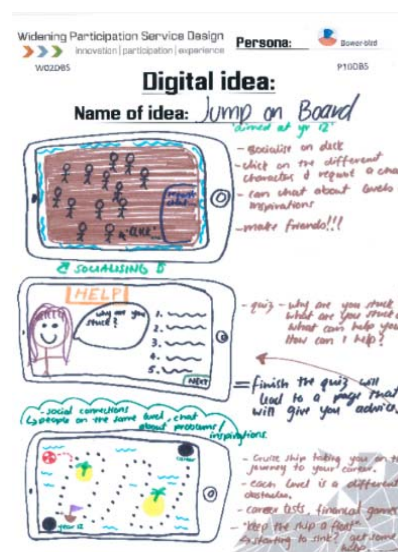


Table 1) and persona level (see appendix B). Interestingly the needs to address fears and emotions rather than just provide information was a key feature for some personas. Participant data was then visualised as digital portal mock-ups for each persona and these were validated in a final study. For an example mock-up see Appendix C.

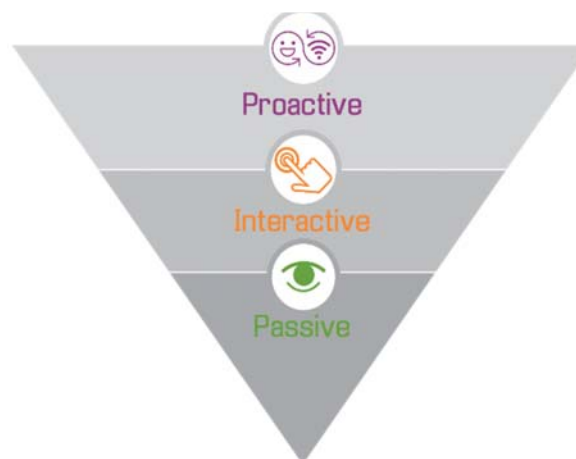
**Table 1 Preferences for digital features**

<p><b>School student themes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher needs for informational, network and instrumental social support; however, Wallabies need emotional and esteem support.</li> <li>• Designed digital tools that were highly focused for the persona that knew their career goal (Tasmanian devils) with broader content for personas that were uncertain of their options or had not commenced the decision-process. The digital tools were highly personalised to create relevance.</li> <li>• The use of storytelling through video and forums to bust myths and demonstrate the reality of tertiary study.</li> <li>• Designed people-rich activities that linked students to different workplace experts and to students with similar career aspirations.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Parent themes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher needs for informational, network and instrumental social support compared to emotional and esteem; however, the Possum persona demonstrated high needs for emotional and esteem support.</li> <li>• Designed digital tools that demystified tertiary education terms and process, linked parents with parents 'like them' and provided access to career planning tools to assist their children.</li> <li>• Designed people-rich activities that brought parents on campus for non-educational purposes to overcome uncertainty and myths, and build identity that tertiary institutions were for people 'like them'. Designed three-way, face-to-face meetings between parents, teachers and students to facilitate career planning and realistic goal-setting.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recent school leaver themes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher needs for informational, network and instrumental social support compared to school students; however, the Tasmanian Devil and Wallaby personas demonstrated high needs for emotional and esteem support.</li> <li>• Stage of change was different from their school student counterpart owing to the sense of urgency created by the completion of school.</li> <li>• Designed digital tools that were short-term and oriented around earning an income or balancing work-life commitments as well as managing the stress and anxiety created by 'leaving their options too late'. Designed people-rich activities that provided information about tertiary study in an incidental, stealthy manner that used daily activities that were important to the persona as a vehicle to deliver tertiary information.</li> </ul>	<p><b>School staff themes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher needs for informational, network and instrumental social support compared to emotional and esteem.</li> <li>• Stage of change was 'action' where school staff are motivated to seek information and assist parents and students.</li> <li>• Designed digital tools that enabled school staff to be the connector of information with parents and students.</li> <li>• Designed people-rich activities that linked school teachers to workplace experts and professional/mentor events.</li> </ul>

Qualitative analysis of the workshop data revealed three categories of digital features suggested by the workshop participants in their visualisations: passive (Web 1.0), interactive (Web 2.0) and proactive (Web 3.0). These categories have been developed into a framework, with the highest level being proactive due to the higher levels of engagement and motivation associated with these digital features and the lowest being the passive level (Kowalkiewicz et al., 2016) (see Figure 3 ).

Using this framework of digital features, the visualised data were analysed to identify the preferences for each of the three features by the personas in each target market. The key differences across the four target markets are shown in Table 2 Digital preferences by target markets.

**Figure 3 Digital tools framework**





**Table 2 Digital preferences by target markets**

<b>High School Learners:</b> Had preferences for all three levels with almost all digital solutions present in their visualisations.	<b>Parents:</b> Had a similar profile to the school students with a preference for all three levels, although noticeably less preference for the interactive tools than the school students. This may reflect a lack of confidence in using these types of digital features and familiarity with Web 1.0. Parents have grown up in a different era to their children where digital media was not as embedded in schooling as it is for their children today (Watson, 2013, p. 74).
<b>Recent School Leavers:</b> Had preferences for the interactive level. This may reflect the time-critical nature of their decision-making being more immediate than the school students who still have time on their side. This finding is consistent with the Position Paper which identified that mature-age students tend to return to study online and have a preference for these types of technologies (Abbott-Chapman, 2011, p. 61).	<b>School Staff:</b> Had a preference for all three levels with a keen interest in proactive features. This may be due to the workload efficiencies that can be gained from the interactive and proactive tools that would enable them to support their students more effectively, without adding the burden of time. This finding is consistent with the findings of the US study cited in the Position Paper about the lack of material for educators which allows them to sufficiently support students (Shechtman et al., 2013, p. 83).

## Discussion

To address the issue of widening participation in tertiary education for low SES groups, this research developed personas within under-represented market segments and used participatory workshops to co-create solutions to generate a change in attitudes and behaviours. As such, this paper advocates a holistic approach to widening participation that collectively engages all stakeholders (students, parents, school staff and university equity practitioners) in finding solutions to the problem. This research converges information in a manner that simplifies decision-making for a service high in credence qualities, and presents an approach that provides for effective evaluation and development of an evidence base (shortcomings of interventions noted by Bennett et al., 2015 and Naylor et al., 2013) of interventions at local, state and national levels.

We identified fifteen personas across four target markets that were gender, age and ethnically neutral based on a psychological segmentation approach. These personas are innovative in that they cut across the traditional demographic groups usually targeted in widening participation interventions and reveal many commonalities that would facilitate the upscaling of social marketing activities. These personas then provide a unique foundation from which to identify digital preferences that would deliver personalised, relevant and tailored access to services for students, recent school leavers, parents and school staff that addresses the current problems of information overload, clutter and passive websites.

Theoretical implications of this study include: challenging myths about low income earners and technological disengagement (Helsper, 2008, Choi & DiNitto, 2013, Newman et. al., 2010); highlighting the role of fear and other emotions in tertiary education participation, thereby expanding beyond information processing and cognitive approaches that emphasise beliefs and attitudes. Managerial implications arising from this research are that, in cluttered market places, digital portals should be developed rather than websites; well-developed personas can be used to guide how marketers reach and influence target markets with more subtlety and precision; and participant design is an important tool for marketers to ensure that the final product is fit for purpose and audience.

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## Appendix A Example Persona Profile



### Tasmanian Devil Learner Past & Present A planned approach to future career

Career goal is to make money	●	●	●	●	●	Career goal is life is a journey
Decided on career path	●	●	●	●	●	Keeping options open
Likes to do things solo	●	●	●	●	●	Likes to do things with others
Sprinting through life	●	●	●	●	●	Strolling through life
Confident about going to study	●	●	●	●	●	Cautious about going to study

### Tasmanian Devil

Stage of Change	Preparation	 <b>Key Messages</b> <i>"Getting back on track for your dream job"</i> Had or have a very clear goal, however life got in the way and they are now off track. Need help building confidence and seeking alternate pathway ways back to study.
Social Support Needed	Network, emotion and esteem	
Motivators to encourage post-school study	Clear goal of the career they desire and the steps needed to get there  Understanding that goal attainment might take longer than desired e.g. articulation pathways	
Barriers to encourage post-school study	Lack of confidence in overcoming hurdles that have prevented them following their chosen path.  Anxiety about financial costs of study versus working	

## Appendix B Example: High school Learners – Framework of Digital Features



Tasmanian  
Devil



Bowerbird




Frilled  
Neck  
Lizard



Wallaby


Passive				
Financial Assistance Information				
Videos/ Podcasts / Blog Storytelling				
Explanations of Tertiary Education Terms				
Study / Career Checklist				
Course Options Catalogue				
Jobs / Careers / Work Experience / Internships Catalogue				
Industry Professionals' Database				
FAQs / Tips/ Hints				
Links to Tertiary Institutions & Social Media Platforms				
Calendar of Events				
Tertiary Institutions Locations Map				
Interactive				
Registration for Local Events				
Profile / CV Builder				
Avatar Builder				
Goal Setting				
Career Quizzes / Calculator				
Pathway Builder				
Games				
Support Forum				
SMS / Call Chat				
Online Chat				
Live Webinar				
Virtual Reality Training / Tours				
Email / Private Messages				
Proactive				
Recommendations				
Assistant				
Autopilot				

## Appendix C: Example Portal mock-up for Tasmanian Devil High School Student



**Site title**  
Tasmanian Devil Portal

Home | Information Portals | Career Showcases | Mentors | Tools



# Fast track your dream job

### Information Portals


**Browse Courses**  
Law  
Business  
IT  
Mathematics  
Art  
Entertainment

**Browse Institutions**  
---  
---  
---  
---

**Scholarships**  
---  
---  
---

**Title**  
---  
---  
---

**Title**  
---  
---  
---

**Location Finder**  
Find courses and facilities in your area  
Register your location  


### Study/Career Checklist

- ☒ Research universities
- ☒ Construct my pathway goals
- ☐ Select study preferences before cut-off

### Event Calendar

March

1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30
31					

**Upcoming events**  
Careers expo Brisbane  
QUIT open day

### Skills Calculator

???

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### Pathway Building Tools


Visualise your career path

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## A day in the life of: A Police Officer

### Profile Builder

???


### Plan B

**Account for detours**

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### Career Showcases

Explore the working life of.....  
Find out what its like to be a **Teacher**  
Find out what its like to be a **Fashion Designer**  
etc

<links>  
<links>  
**Find more**

### Options Catalogue

 Browse through career options

---

---

### Games


### Career Quiz

Find the most suitable job for you






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Share



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**Live chat**



not seeing what you want?

**See all features >>**

Find out more

Information for those living in

Information for those

Information for those

Information for those